FIELD BUILDING

(NOW LA SALLE NATIONAL BANK BUILDING)

135 SOUTH LA SALLE STREET
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

PRELIMINARY STAFF SUMMARY OF INFORMATION
SUBMITTED TO THE COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS
OCTOBER, 1990

FIELD BUILDING

(now LaSalle National Bank Building)
135 South LaSalle Street

ARCHITECT: Graham, Anderson, Probst and White

DATE: 1928 - 1934

Facing on the "Wall Street of the West, "the Field Building stands in Chicago's financial district occupying a full half block bounded by LaSalle, Adams, and Clark streets. Originally named after the city's early merchandising mogul, Marshall Field, whose vast estate financed its construction, the building's design was the work of the premier architectural firm of Graham, Anderson, Probst and White. It was conceived and constructed over a six-year period from 1928 to 1934, a span of time that saw the United States go from the financial prosperity of the 1920s into the economic chaos of the Great Depression. When it officially opened, only one other large construction project--Rockefeller Center in New York City--was underway in the entire country. The Field Building would be the last major commercial building to go up in the Loop for twenty-five years as the Depression and then World War II halted any significant new building. Hence, it remains, historically, as architectural historian Sally Chappell notes, "one of the last, richest, and one of the best repositories of the images of the machine age," the latter a reference to the Art Deco styling consummately expressed in both the exterior and interior of the Field Building.

Graham, Anderson, Probst and White

Graham, Anderson, Probst and White has come to be regarded as the principal successor firm to Chicago's prestigious D. H. Burnham and Company. When its founder, the legendary architect and city planner Daniel H. Burnham, died in 1912, his practice was reconstituted by his two sons Daniel and Hubert and by Ernest Graham as Graham, Burnham and Company. This relationship was dissolved in 1917 when the Burnham brothers founded their own firm and Graham formed a partnership with Peirce Anderson, Edward Probst, and Howard Judson White. During the 1920s and 1930s, Graham, Anderson, Probst and White rose in prominence to become one of if not the leading architectural practice in the nation, having taken the larger share of the original Burnham practice. Identified mainly with a corporate, commercial, and institutional clientele, the organization was ably directed and managed by the oldest and most senior partner, Ernest Robert Graham.

A native of Lowell, Massachusetts, Graham (1866-1936) received technical training at Coe College in Iowa and at the University of Notre Dame. Starting as a young draftsman at D. H. Burnham and Company, he became a partner in less than ten years. One of his early responsibilities was supervision of the construction of several buildings at the 1893 World's Fair. Graham's legacy to Chicago extends beyond architecture. He donated funds for the erection of the Field Museum of Natural History's Hall of Geology and also presented to that museum two of this country's largest collections of ancient Coptic textiles. The Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, which supports research and writing in the fields of architecture and urban planning, was created by his request.

At the time of its completion, the Field Building was Chicago's largest office building and the fourth largest in the country. *(Bob Thall, photographer)*

Of the four principals, Peirce Anderson (1870-1942) was the best educated and most cosmopolitan. As well as a B.A. from Harvard University and a graduate degree in engineering from Johns Hopkins, Anderson also received a diploma from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He joined D. H. Burnham and Company in 1900. An especially skilled draftsman, he rapidly rose to chief designer and was head of the design department as partner in Graham, Anderson, Probst and White. He is particularly associated with the commissions the firm received outside of Chicago, most notably the Union Station in Washington, D.C. Anderson served on the Capitol City's Fine Arts Commission in the distinguished company of Frederick Law Olmstead and Augustus St. Gaudens, an appointment given to him by President Taft in 1912 when Burnham's death created the vacancy.

Both Edward Probst (1870-1942) and Howard Judson White (1870-1936) were native Chicagoans. The former was educated at public schools and worked for a number of architects,

including Peter B. Wight, before joining D. H. Burnham in 1893 where in 1908 he was given responsibility for the supervision of working plans. A resident of River Forest, he was a prominent member of the Illinois Society of Architects, serving a two-year term as its director. Howard White was also educated in Chicago's public schools and received technical background at the Manual Training School. Entering the firm in 1898 as a draftsman, in 1905 he became Graham's assistant responsible for letting contracts and supervising construction.

As is the case in any large architectural operation, other members of the firm also deserve mention for work on a particular project. T. Clifford Noonan and Alfred P. Shaw did the original sketches for the Field Building. Noonan, who retired as a senior vice president of the firm, died on August 13, 1990, at the age of ninety. A graduate in architecture from the University of Notre Dame, he was a native of LaSalle, Illinois. According to his obituary, he was proudest of his work on the State Department Building in Washington, D. C., built in the late 1950s. Alfred P. Shaw, who died in 1970, was born in 1895 in Boston, Massachusetts and educated there at the Boston Architectural Club atelier. He was a partner with Ernest Graham from 1929 to 1937 and later a partner in his own firm, Shaw, Naess and Murphy.

The contribution of Graham, Anderson, Probst and White to Chicago's building stock has been substantial. Among those most familiar are the Wrigley Building (1921); the Continental and Federal Reserve banks (1924); the Shedd Aquarium (1929); the Field Museum (1921); the Civic Opera House and the Merchandise Mart (both 1929). Recognized nationally for their expertise in large-scale railroad station architecture, the firm designed terminals in Philadelphia, Omaha, Cleveland, and Los Angeles as well as Chicago's own Union Station (1924).

Graham, Anderson, Probst and White and the Field Estate

Graham, Anderson, Probst and White had long enjoyed the patronage of the Marshall Field family and the descendants and trustees who governed his estate. The relationship extended back to the days of D. H. Burnham and Company when the flagship State Street store was built between 1902 and 1907 with the Annex Building following in 1914. Both the Field Museum of Natural History and the Shedd Aquarium came to Graham, Anderson, Probst and White from the Field connection. John G. Shedd had been president and chairman of the board of Marshall Field and Company and his aquarium, located just across Lake Shore Drive from the Field Museum, was designed to complement that building. Another Marshall Field employee to utilize Graham, Anderson, Probst and White was the dynamic retail executive Harry Gordon Selfridge. In 1909, Selfridge left the United States to introduce and successfully promote the first American-style department store abroad. The Selfridge and Company Building in London was constructed over the years 1909-1928. Although few may be aware of it, two other familiar buildings used daily by Chicagoans have a Marshall Field-Graham, Anderson, Probst and White link. The Chicago Title and Trust Company Building at 111 West Washington, built in 1913, was originally called the Conway Building after Conway, Massachusetts, the small rural community where Marshall Field was born. The Pittsfield Building, 55 East Washington Street, built in 1927, was named after Pittsfield, Massachusetts where the senior Field started his career working as a clerk in a dry goods and crockery store. Before the Pentagon was built in Washington, D.C., Chicago's Merchandise Mart was considered the largest building in the world. This mammoth project was executed for the Field estate in 1929. That same year, the firm served as a consultant on the Marshall Field Garden Apartments, one of the first low-income housing projects in Chicago.

Chamfered corners sculpt the forty-three-story central tower and twenty-two-story surrounding wings of the limestone clad Field Building. *(Bob Thall, photographer)*

When preliminary sketches for the Field Building were developed in June of 1928, the economy was still on the upswing fueled by the buoyant optimism that pervaded the United States during the 1920s. But June of 1931, when the working drawings were issued, hardly seemed like the most fortuitous time to engage in a speculative real estate venture. Yet, while the Field estate had certainly been dented by the Depression, it was hardly desperate; it was just that enormous. Despite some reservations, the trustees, led by the entrepreneurial spirit Marshall Field III inherited from his grandfather, decided to take the plunge. Stephen Becker details the decision in his 1964 biography of the third Marshall Field:

> It was a big risk. Business failures were frequent, and there were vacancies in practically every office building in the city; portents for the future were not good. But costs were down and labor was cheaper; the construction would create jobs; if the economy recovered later the building would prove to have been inspired investment. They took the chance . . . and the gamble paid off. The work helped Chicago and offered a psychological lift; first-class tenants moved in; the lower costs proved extraordinarily economical, particularly as the dollar inflated slowly over the next twenty-five years; and the relative opulence of the building--its interiors were considered extravagantly modern in 1934--preserved it from obsolescence. From any point of view, the Field Building was a good thing.

Even more daring on the part of the trustees was the decision not to solicit tenants from other office buildings. In those lean times, existing office buildings would not be deprived of tenant income. Instead the Field Building would house new firms or new branches of old firms. Although prudent businessmen, the trustees of the Field estate also had a sense of civic responsibility. Historians readily acknowledge the importance of the first Marshall Field to the economic and social development of the City of Chicago. The department store that bears his name is world famous and has long been venerated as a Chicago institution. Not so widely heralded, indeed little known, is the vital contribution made to Chicago by Marshall Field III and the Field Building.

The Architecture of the Field Building

In order to make way for the Field Building, six existing structures were razed. This group included the 1884 William Le Baron Jenney-designed Home Insurance Building, the prototype for highrise skeleton-frame commercial architecture. As leases expired and tenants moved out, the wrecking ball moved in. Construction took place in stages with the first unit at the northeast corner of LaSalle and Adams streets opening in 1932. When fully completed in 1934, the Field Building was actually a complex, composed of a forty-three-story, oblong, slab-like central tower flanked by the simple cubic forms of four twenty-two-story wings. As befits an Art Deco skyscraper of the 1930s, the Field Building has a sleek, streamlined look with a pronounced vertical emphasis. Suppressed spandrels allow the soaring upwards thrust of the piers to dominate. As architectural historian Carl Condit noted, "Graham, Anderson, Probst and White turned their backs once and for all on the past and produced a Sullivanesque skyscraper stripped down to essentials--a dense array of uniform vertical limestone bands topped by a horizontal spandrel that simply marks the outer face of the parapet at the roof."

Polished black granite surrounds the dramatically scaled, five-story identical entrances on LaSalle and Clark streets. *(Bob Thall, photographer)*

Commercial Art Deco buildings in America were not elitist architecture. The public were meant to have a sensory experience whether they worked in it or just walked by it. Hence aesthetic attention was focused where it mattered most--at the street level, entrances, and interior common spaces. Dramatically scaled to five stories in height, the identical primary LaSalle and Clark street entrances of the Field Building are elegantly framed in broad widths of polished black granite. Square-cut columns of fluted white bronze capped by a zigzag incised cornice demarcate the four revolving doors. Black granite surrounds the ground-floor display windows and the white bronze continues up to the fifth floor for window trim and spandrels.

More impressive, however, is the Field Building's interior public space which, as the brochure for prospective tenants noted, "carries out the promise of its exterior in embodying the best expression of modern skyscraper architecture." These are manifestations of Art Deco as the style segued into Art Moderne or the more severe "Depression modern." Gone is the novel ornament of profuse curvilinear or floral interlaced patterns or designs, or the carved figures in motion of the Jazz Age-Roaring Twenties Art Deco. Instead, the Depression-era Art Deco shears away extraneous embellishment and uses unbroken lines, pure colors, flat surfaces, and contrasts in light and shadow for drama and emphasis. While more austere in juxtaposition to the lavish, often exotic 1920s Art Deco, the spare style of the Field Building is no less stylish or sophisticated.

A two-story lobby arcade runs the entire length of the building paralleled by a basement arcade, similar except for some reduction in ceiling height. At that time, only the Palmer House Hotel had a block long arcade. Only the most opulent materials were used throughout. Floors are of white mosaic terrazzo which, at either end of the building, incorporate the building's logo, two letters *F* placed back to back. Fluted pilasters of creamy white Colorado Yule marble rise the full height from floor to ceiling. Recessed panels between are a vibrant beige Italian Loredo Chiaro marble. All exposed metal work is gleaming nickel silver. Colors and textures are enhanced by indirect lighting. Elevator lobbies feature tiered prismatic glass fixtures. Emblematic of the subtle detail found in the Field Building is the combination giant elevator indicator and main mail chute. Cast especially for the building, it is in the form of the building itself. Also distinctive are the mirrored bridges linking the north and south balconies whose nautical railings illustrate the popularity of transportation themes in the Art Deco decorative lexicon. No less attention was bestowed on the office floors which featured green mosaic terrazzo floors, shoulder-high wainscoting of white-gray Arno vein marble from Colorado and verde antique marble bases from Vermont.

Technically, the Field Building was masterful. Most advanced was the introduction of air-conditioning or "man-made weather," to the basement and first four floors, the first building in Chicago to feature this scientific engineering. The Field Building was also the first building in the Midwest to have aluminum window frames and to enclose the radiators and pipes in the offices. Other state-of-the-art features included high-speed elevators, pure drinking water piped through fountains into the building, and alternating electric current which allowed for the use of electric fans and clocks. Not forgotten were the amenities. Restaurant service ran the gamut from an executive dining room to a middle management grill to a simple coffee shop. A laundry and towel service was provided for tenants. Shops lining the main floor arcade included telegraph stations, cigar and news stands, a stationery store, a candy shop, and a florist, among others. Located in the basement arcade was a drug store, barber shop, beauty parlor, and a gymnasium, the latter, however, being for men only.

The Field Building was the largest office building in Chicago and the fourth largest in the United States. Everything about the structure was on a majestic scale. On April 24, 1932, the *Chicago Sunday Tribune* published the following figures about the building:

> On the outside of the walls will be used 158,000 cubic feet of Indiana limestone and 6,000 cubic feet of granite. Inside there will be 120,000 square feet of marble, 500,000 board feet of walnut lumber and veneers and 150,000 linear feet of wood base and mouldings. [Also noted] 31,000 electric outlets; 25,000 tons of steel; 3,300 windows of solid aluminum sash; 29,000 cubic yards of structural concrete and 43,000 barrels of cement.

This same issue of the newspaper also stated: "Several building records have been smashed during its erection. The entire twenty-three floors of steel work were completed in forty working days, or 320 hours. This is but a little more than half the time usually required for a job of this size." Local legend tells that some said that the double *F* of the building's logo translated into "Field's Folly," but the success of the Field Building ultimately silenced all the naysayers.

Architectural historian Sally Chappell, a recognized authority on the work of Graham, Anderson, Probst and White, summarizes the special significance of the Field Building:

> In the Field Building, erected in the worst of circumstances, Graham, Anderson, Probst and White's choice of materials, the perfectionism of their planning and craftsmanship, their commitment to state-of-the-art service systems, and their stylish forms created a work of architecture among the best of their place and time.

Undaunted by adversity, the Field estate and its architects had forged ahead with a project important in the 1930s for its undeniable contribution to the deeply depleted economy of the city. But as the brochure for prospective tenants stated: "The Field Building dedicates itself to the future of LaSalle Street and Chicago." Their faith in the future was justified. Equally significant, the timeless Art Deco elegance of the Field Building has always been meticulously maintained and conscientiously preserved, making it a classic among Chicago's famous buildings.

Elegantly finished in the most opulent materials, a two-story lobby arcade runs the entire length of the building which has remained largely unchanged since this photograph was taken in the 1930s. *(Photograph courtesy of Hedrich-Blessing)*

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Additional material used in the preparation of this report is on file at the office of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks and is available to the public.

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Staff for this Publication

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The Commission on Chicago Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to the designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from the qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. This preliminary summary of information has been prepared by the Commission staff and was submitted to the Commission when it initiated consideration of the historical and architectural qualities of this potential landmark.

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